



May 28, 2008

Hail to the harvest

Track the Ohio Valley's summertime bounty with our produce guide

By Pableaux Johnson

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"And then in July, when the blackberries come in, we just sit around the table with a few pints, roll them around in sugar, and eat them just like that."

I'd never seen this particular friend wax poetic about fruit before, but here she was, weaving a hypnotic tale of Ohio Valley summertime, when berry baskets appear like magic at farmers markets and roadside stands.

I sat across her desk like a slack-jawed zombie, salivating and lost in visions of juicy, vine-ripened goodness. I saw cobbler and pies, ice creams and sauces. My favorite shirts stained purple beyond recognition.

"Pableaux? Are you in there?"

"Yeah, of course. ..." I shook off my spell and wiped a bit of drool from my beard. "When was that season again?"

"Sometime in July," she said. "You'd better be ready."

Reading the seasons

Ever since landing in Louisville, I've been tied to the farms. A few days before Christmas, I bought the season's last beets from a shivering farmer on Bardstown Road. I spent early spring mastering the art of quick-steamed kale. I worried that a freak spring frost would kill all the summer fruit, just as it had last year.

I studied the Kentucky Farm Bureau's harvest calendar like a childhood Christmas catalog. Peaches come in late June, along with the raspberries. Apples should run all the way through fall this year. And tomatoes, the most magical of foods, around the Fourth of July (weather permitting).

This year, my first in Kentuckiana, I was determined not to miss a bit of the home-grown fun.

I was gonna be ready.

On front of the fridge

So like any produce-obsessed newcomer, I wanted to track local farmers' harvests using the kitchen's one foolproof communication device -- the refrigerator door.

Thanks to The Courier-Journal's talented art department, we present a new addition to the annual You-Pick guide: a double-barreled ripening guide and harvest chart.

Cross-referenced for convenience

The charts present approximate ripening dates in two formats for easy visualization.

The first, on the front page of this section, is by crop. Fruits and vegetables are arranged alphabetically so you can mark your favorites and see what else grows at the same time.

The chart on this page is by date -- a chronological view of the area's harvests -- so you can tell at a glance that though asparagus might be tapering off, sweet corn will be coming soon enough.

We hope these views of the growing season will help you synchronize your cooking with the area's peak harvests -- inspiring you to buy from local growers and helping you capitalize on peak-season savings, either at the grocery store or local farmers markets.

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